



# Cult or Culture? What happens during Coaching?

Dr. Bernd Schmid1

Undoubtedly quality assurance in coaching is important, otherwise you give free reign to arbitrariness and charlatanism. This is why in coaching and coach training as well as in association work in the field of coaching we make sure that professionals attain a solid store of concepts and procedures and learn to design coaching processes consciously. But can goal orientation and the controllability of processes be priority quality criteria for coaching?

In the middle of the last century, Eric Berne, the founder of transactional analysis, basically phrased it this way: *Scientific methods, which offer more security, and intuition, which opens up more options, are the mutual basis for creative action.*

In 1979, together with my friend Gunther Schmidt, I had the opportunity to attend a week of study sessions with the legendary hypno-therapist Milton Erickson. At that time I had already absolved several further training courses such as group dynamics, transactional analysis and scientific counselling, so I was not inexperienced as far as methods and concepts in the field of communication are concerned. As a university didactics person and trainee coach I also had a lot of ideas about didactics in complex learning experiences.

So I would now like to describe two very “untidy experiences” during my learning process with Milton Erickson:

*I had arrived in boiling hot Phoenix in the Arizona Desert the evening before. The seminar took place in a house at the back of Erickson's private estate. I entered a*

*room full of about 16 unknown people. Nobody was interested in my ideas, made a contract with me or informed me of content or procedure.*

*I sat down. Milton Erickson began the seminar abruptly with stories of his thoughts on hypno-therapy. He interspersed examples from his practice or advised participants who were available for demonstrations. I had problems settling in and found it hard to understand his accent. In addition came the strain of coping with all the unexpected and hard to classify aspects of the orchestration. After about 2 hours I was no longer able to identify the content of Erickson's words, only heard mumblings that sounded American. A friendly technician offered me headphones through which I could hear the sound of the television recording being made at the same time in order to remedy my "impaired hearing". I then heard the same acoustically flawless mumbling, but still could not understand the words. A lost day? Had I taken this trip and a considerable burden on myself for this? Finally I gave up and exposed myself to an endless flow of unintelligible mumbling for the remaining hours of the day.*

*The next day was better and I hardly had any more acoustic problems.*

*About a year later I tackled the tapes of this "lost day" in order to catch up on what I thought I had missed. But to my surprise I heard nothing on the tapes that I had not remembered. I even recognized working materials that I had already adopted in my (at that time psychotherapeutic) work. Somehow I had got everything. But who had had "impaired hearing" and who had heard everything in spite of it? And who was this I who had understood and learnt according to his own plan and implemented it?*

*Another experience at this teaching seminar with Milton Erickson:*

*I was very eager to learn, but Erickson gave me no opportunity to work with him directly. First of all, this led to frustration, and then to a "relationship mania". I suddenly saw clearly that Erickson had recognized both my talent and my need for control. He must have decided to further me in a special way, but had decided to work with me indirectly and "in code" instead of directly because of my zeal for controlling. Without addressing me directly, he hid important messages to me in his stories and demonstrations. I was electrified and related everything to me personally.*

*This remained so for weeks afterwards and I was fascinated at how the teachings of the master worked themselves into my thoughts, my methods and my relationship to my clients' complexity all on their own. I often didn't even notice this until it was in full swing. My consciousness had the function of an observer. But who was orchestrating it? Later, in a conversation with Jeff Zeig<sup>2</sup>, I finally saw clearly what I had merely suspected up until then. Most of what I had related to myself was not meant especially for me. But what difference did that make now? I would not relinquish what had developed inside me.*

Unfortunately Erickson died not long after this, so his invitation to attend further training seminars remains open. Although I only spent five days with Erickson in Phoenix, he has remained one of my most important teachers over the decades.

Why am I telling you this? Certainly not to justify all kinds of mumbo jumbo. Rather to suggest that you should not consider solid handicraft skills as the only important thing in coaching.

To illustrate this, I would like to tell you something from our long experience in qualifying professionals at the Institute for Systemic Consultation in Wiesloch. Those who have absolved our training courses report in written and oral form on decisive learning experiences during the 12 blocks of the two year curriculum. They often tell of decisive situations that were not at the centre of our didactic planning, our contextual perspectives or our methodical demonstrations. What is decisive for participants seems often to occur on the occasion of casual remarks on the fringe of official events, often at a completely different time, in the light of a different subject and at a different place than planned. And yet these learning situations do not seem to take place in any definite processes or accidentally, but on the fringe of valuable learning situations and decisive personal encounters.

On the one hand, then, they cannot be left to chance, but on the other hand nor can they be planned or designed directly. We need to create proper learning situations in accordance with handicraft quality criteria, yet still have to assume that what is essential for the learner takes place uncontrollably on the fringe. A scientific

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Zeig: My voice will go with you

description of the problem and a pedagogic methodology related to it still need to be developed. At the moment we are preparing a scientific project on this subject.

#### A paradoxical situation

We need to organize learning in a tidy and controllable way and at the same time assume that what is essential cannot be tackled in a planned or methodical manner. To use a sailing metaphor, equipment and competence must be available, but they can only skilfully catch the wind, not create it. If you want to be certain, you can always use an engine, but then you are not sailing, not dealing with something that is uncontrollable on principle. And yet in a lull or in order to create better wind conditions an engine can be helpful, though in the function of an additional aid. What coach or group leader doesn't know how you suffer when you haven't done anything wrong and still no stable, lively breeze springs up? Then rowing or the use of an engine is the order of the day. This is all right, but may be exhausting and is hardly inspiring. If you want to avoid this risk, you can invite people on rowing or motorboat excursions, but you give up the thrill of letting the elements carry you.

Let's get back to coaching and to the courses on coaching. The processes must be such that they can be carried out in a reasonably focussed and methodical way. At the same time, they must be open enough that subjects are worked on and personal learning takes place in the background which are inspired and promoted by the organization in the foreground, but cannot definitely be ascribed to it in a specific case. We help ourselves out with terms such as *systemic didactics* to give a name to the didactic mix which attempts to do justice to the many varied references to reality. We speak of *fragmented learning* to make it clear that completeness is an illusion and examples should primarily create high-quality learning situations in connection with which and on whose edges what is essential can occur. We speak of *qualitative transfer* to clarify that contextual transferability is only partly decisive and that the stimulation of many-varied learning and creative transfer is far more important when the efficacy of a measure needs to be evaluated. It is easiest to convince people of this as long as they are in direct contact with such experiences. One problem for learning is the control criteria arising from our own socialization. The "education controller in our own heads" and the company education controllers outside cannot give these quality criteria enough weight with their usual categories, as they see

themselves obliged to “objective control”. This often leads to the difficult situation that fruitful learning is put under unsuitable qualifying criteria. A culture of learning is strangled if this gets out of hand. So it is important to include both the inner education controllers of the teachers and pupils, as well as the people occupied in the company, in dealing with the paradox described above so as to provide them with better quality criteria. A different and more diverse method for internal and external communication about learning is required. We try to help accomplish this.

As an example let me mention that participants in our curricula readily get into a predicament when asked to explain what systemic is. Instead of answering the question with a definition, it has proved more convincing to describe the course of a consultant market exercise, for example.

*During a consultant market exercise in sub-groups, A describes a work problem. After asking a few short questions, B, C and D outline the problem in their view and make an offer for consultation to client A. He makes his choice and receives consultation from the person he has chosen (let's say it was B). C and D now have to “adjust”. They are now responsible for the collegial supervision of B in relationship to his consultation with A. This necessitates a not just superficial change of roles and focus in order not to get caught up in the background of the previous situation of competition. After consultation and the related collegial supervision, the market events are discussed again. Why did A give B the assignment? Was this a good decision in retrospect? What behaviours on the part of C and D led to them not being chosen? How might their offers have had a better chance? Etc.*

This kind of description renders the proximity to practice, the necessary discipline as far as focus and roles are concerned, the deliberate change of levels of communication, the linking between personal learning and objective questions as well as proof of worth in communication with clients directly tangible. Usually it will convince even ungracious watchdogs, although even they cannot define what systemic is afterwards.

We use a similar method to evaluate further training and coaching using a circular approach. The personal feeling of having learnt a lot is not a sufficient criteria – but

nor is “objective evidence”. Instead of proving the efficacy of learning directly, we ask competent partners in the professional environment for their evaluation of the learners in respect to their progress and how they transfer what they have learnt to their professional activities. This brings together objective and intuitive assessments. Moreover, it has the advantage that this evaluation has market relevance, since assessment and recommendation work this way in practice anyway. You still don't have the same amount of control as with objectivization, of course; but you do have something more complex and essential which does more justice to complex organisms.

Something that is controllable readily becomes banal and is only good for justification purposes. If control alone does not suffice to ensure quality in coaching, what does? How can we differentiate between all kinds of cults and a meaningful culture of learning? How can we protect ourselves from sects without becoming an inquisitorial sect ourselves?

Another story may elucidate this. I am not merely following Milton Erickson's tradition, who generally refused explanations and answered questions with a new story. I myself also believe in the power of explanations, provided they are given in the same spirit.

#### My John Lilly story

At a New Age Congress in the USA in the seventies, John Lilly talked about his studies on the learning ability of dolphins. An attempt was made to explore the learning ability of these animals by trying to teach them to fully master complicated leaps. At a certain moment Lilly was hit by the sudden realization that the experiment had little to do with learning ability.

On sober observation he came to the following conclusion:

- the dolphins learnt nothing that they couldn't have done or learnt if it had made any sense to them;
- they learnt to do things because of the reward, even though they made no sense from their perspective on reality;
- they forgot the freedom to do or not do these things, and

- they forgot playful alternatives, as they were trained to be reliable.

So it was more a matter of training than of intelligent learning. I am not saying that training is always a bad thing. But we can probably readily agree that in creative professions we cannot afford blinkers of any description. The problem is that we – like John Lilly – usually don't recognize immediately whether a learning process serves to extend one's creative potential or whether we get caught up in a blinker mentality from which it is sometimes difficult to find the way out of.

It is not easy, then, to distinguish difficult wind conditions from bad sailing, or calmly sitting out a lull from inaction in the face of slack periods or when problems are brewing. Nor is it easy to distinguish where there are processes that are difficult to describe but which are being dealt with integrity, and where people with blinkers on are doing magical veil dances, possibly with the intention of exploitation.

Another reason why assessment is not always easy lies in the fact that every pied piper method also augurs something valuable and links with unfulfilled yearnings, otherwise no-one would follow. The difference is not necessarily to be found in the contents, models and methods, but possibly in the simultaneously lived and learnt mentalities when using them, in the learning and professional culture, so to speak.

When dealing with very complex matters and questions that are hard to define, new and often unusual perspectives are called for and need to be gained, if possible, in quantum leaps because the way would be much too long and costly on foot. In order to get into contact with new perspectives one seeks out unusual surroundings, a manager seeks out a coach, for example, and is prepared to get involved in things that seem strange. Anything rather than stew in one's own old juice. At the same time, one desires to protect oneself from bad choices because one cannot afford them just now. It is particularly difficult for someone inexperienced in a certain discipline or under pressure to assess unusual perspectives.

Another paradox

In this situation, a dilemma opens up with respect to personal education controlling. If you want to be certain you try to sort everything out using available preconceptions and familiar criteria. However, this makes learning strenuous. When in doubt, if you want to be picked up and carried, you need to make use of available, familiar matter-of-factness and competence. You have to put your own judgement aside in order not to forfeit the quantum leap, since it is said that temporary confusion is quite normal. The pied pipers – they above all - also bet on this horse. The problem is, though, that it is hard to distinguish when you ought to follow the coach's advice and when not.

So dealing with an at least temporary insecurity of judgement is essential for every learning process intended to lead to new dimensions. In such transitional phases you may be tempted and are vulnerable.

When things go wrong, you establish after a long process that you have gotten involved in lots of things and used up additional resources and scope and yet still have not profited from them or have even been misguided. At least you regain your usual competence. Sometimes you wonder whether this is an effect of learning or a stupor wearing off. A morning-after feeling is the result. And some people claim that you are just stubborn. Weaker souls are in danger of getting more and more stuck in these dead ends in order to maybe still become at least a fellow actor in this field.

Now I do not wish to make clients and learners out to be all too weak and vulnerable. However, if you are honest, most of us have a great longing – in general and in difficult situations in particular – to surrender to a greater wisdom. The greater and more unspecific these longings are, the greater is the danger of a bitter experience. If the need for salvation is kept small, the danger of being disappointed is not so great, but the chance for a really broadening and delightful learning experience is also very much smaller.

The problem of coaching as well as in further training as a coach is to stay alert to whether the measure really fits and to orchestrate learning processes in such a way that the risks and side effects are controlled. Orientation, topical clarity and the ability to act need to be established in such a way that the images of reality adopted thereby do not turn into blinkers.

So dealing with the unusual and one's own uncertainty of judgement is an elemental part of creative learning processes. Even so, the client or participant in further training can do much to protect himself from going astray and becoming prone to the dynamics of sects, for example.

Indications of the dynamics of sects

- single aspects are made out to be redeeming truths;
- anyone who doesn't believe has imply not understood;
- what is important is chronically shifted into a non-verifiable sphere;
- only minions have the right to recognize the truth;
- you feel more and more inhibited about comparing the pictures of reality being developed with concrete experiences of your own;
- pressure to conform, fairly presented reservations are outlawed;
- the world is separated into believers and defectors, the chosen and the repudiated;
- a more highly valued vision is the criteria for quality rather than actual life;
- values are readily proclaimed, but there are valuable reasons why they are not lived out in one's own ranks;
- human dimensions are subordinated to the higher goals;
- others are made out to be opponents and external criticism is then hostile behaviour.

The world is not made up of sects and better people; everyone needs to be aware of whether he is susceptible to the dynamics of sects. The best protection against it is a solid anchoring in the real life of a society and dealing consciously with one's own longings.

What should you look out for?

- Keep up a lively exchange with sensible people outside your narrower cultural circle in order to examine ever again whether its development is plausible to others. Watch out for the reactions of important others, both in the workplace and at home.
- Open cultures do not polarise, do not produce conflicts of loyalty, they are

rather about acknowledgement of other realities and complementary views.

- Within a culture realities fit even without the leading figure and are carried on by many people independently and creatively.
- Open cultures do not postulate higher significance as a result of membership alone, but face up to the concrete demonstration of its worth and value in the worlds they live from and with.
- Open cultures want to serve, not dominate. Their object is complementarity and integration in the whole, not to be the chosen few and to dominate.
- Experiences in open cultures are not only valid in the magic of the moment in certain environments, but rather accumulate in temporal and spatial distance. In the middle term, disillusionment is more likely to lessen upon withdrawal and one's own power arising from the experience of belonging is more likely to increase. The first fire of enthusiasm is more likely to turn into a silent glow than ever sparkling fireworks.

Whether cultures adopt sect-like traits also has to do with the environment. In rigid environments, sect-like themselves, even open cultures may often be subject to pressures so that they have to protect themselves with mechanisms which may cause them to lapse into sect cultures.

In the realm of coaching there are no safe answers to the question 'cult or society-promoting culture of learning'. However, these remarks ought to promote awareness for questions that need to be asked over and over again. As in the case of terrorism, it is decisive that unacceptable manners of speech are clearly renounced but that undesirable trends are answered with better solutions for the needs of those who have been led astray.

Many of the wild developments in the psycho-market have turned into respectable contributions to society. Thus over-sensitivity is not helpful.

One last story:

In the seventies, Professor Manfred Sader answered my question on the risks of participating in a group-dynamic seminar with this comment: "Group dynamics is

about twice as dangerous as everyday life and about half as dangerous as getting married.”